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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses what is illusionary about the implication that a more representative canon has anything to do with a more representative student body and university administration and, ultimately, a better representation of marginalized groups in society. It considers the institutional and methodological barriers which hinder such changes and then turns to its main thesis that for any reform of the canon and of the curriculum in literature to be successful students first need to learn about the controversies surrounding the definitions and redefinitions of the canon. The paper argues for bringing the debate within the profession into the classroom, noting that both sides at odds do not consider the change in higher education's structure, wherein the teaching of literature becomes ever more marginalized as colleges turn into pre-professional schools with little room for the liberal arts. It stresses that only by giving students a clear picture of how the canon was used in the past and what is at stake when it is changed can they appreciate the alternatives that their professors want to offer. The paper outlines approaches to canonical texts which highlight the controversies surrounding the canon and which can motivate students to abandon received ways of reading literature--ground for a reformed canon must be prepared by changes in the ways texts are read. The paper's final point is that there are chances missed when new texts are simply substituted for the traditional canon. Contains 19 notes and 15 references. (NKA)

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REFORMING THE LITERARY CANON BY TEACHING IT

ED 405 603

It is a common experience among teachers of literature at the college level that courses which offer alternatives to the canon do not attract the numbers of students which these courses seem to deserve. In German, Kafka and Goethe still sell better than courses on literature by immigrant workers. Our enthusiasm in offering alternative courses is often dampened by the seeming lack of interest among students in the works of authors who cannot compete with the rate of name recognition of the canonized authors. In the course of reforming the canon and of designing new courses we seem to have failed to explain to our students why we want to change the canon to begin with. Our disappointment is even greater because, in the back of our minds at least, we had even further reaching intentions than just reforming the canon or the curriculum: We thought we were beginning to change the institutions in which we teach and, ultimately, the society in which we live. In this paper, I want to address what is illusionary about the implication that a more representative canon has anything to do with a more representative student body and university administration and, ultimately, a better representation of marginalized groups in our society. I will address the institutional and methodological barriers which stand in the way of such changes. I will then turn to my main thesis that for any reform of the canon and of the curriculum in literature to be successful we need to teach our students the controversies surrounding the definitions and redefinitions of the canon. We need to bring the debate which is raging in our profession into the classrooms.[1] Only by giving our students a clear picture of how the canon was used in the past and what is at stake when we change it can they appreciate the

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alternatives which we want to offer. Paradoxically, this is why we still have to teach the canon. I will outline approaches to canonical texts which highlight the controversies surrounding the canon and which can motivate students to abandon received ways of reading literature. The ground for a reformed canon must be prepared by drastic changes in the ways we read. These new ways of reading can only be taught by contrast to how the canon used to be read and taught. At the same time, these approaches open up ways of reading the canon against the grain. This will lead to my final point, the dangers and the chances missed when we simply substitute new texts for the traditional canon we want to get rid of.

It is an illusion to think that through intensive work on rediscovering authors belonging to marginalized groups we could ever duplicate the diversity of the society we teach in. For reasons which I will address later the textual basis for such a representational approach to the canon is just not broad enough. We would have to look at completely different arenas of cultural production in order to balance the advantage the dominant culture has in the realm of literary products. But even this approach would be obscuring the fact that while other cultural products might have a status equal to that of literature in certain university courses, the power and status of what is called literary or poetic will not be changed in all other spheres of society. Only when the culturally constructed hierarchy of different forms of expression is addressed can the impression be avoided that the syllabus represents a pluralistic cross section of cultural production. In fact, expanding the canon to arrive at a representative spectrum on the level of literature would give the false impression that equal representation even exists, the false impression that society as a whole can be represented in the study of literature. Thus, representation

would exist at the level of consumption or reading and would obscure the inequalities at the level of production of literature.[2] Including into the canon works previously excluded can not make up for the primary injustice of the lack of access to literary means of expression. A syllabus representative of the diversity of groups in our society would furthermore obscure the lack of representation of many groups in our classroom, in the university administration and in our government. We would create in the classrooom the illusionary impression of a truely pluralistic and multicultural society, a repetition of the illusion of the Sixties that through the study of Marx and workers' literature on university campuses we were on the road to social justice. The imaginary political function of canon reform can easily be seen by the fact that the writings of political asylum seekers have made it onto the syllabi in some German departments while it is getting harder and harder for them to make it across the borders into Germany.[3] The situation is further complicated by methodological considerations which should prevent us, but do not always do so, from taking the literary expressions of authors from certain social groups as the expression of the real life experience of those groups. While first of all the authors might be constructing literary experiences in opposition to real life experience they might also not have anything in common with other members of their social group.

When expanding the canon we might actually not be blazing trails into new territory. We might actually be trying to catch up with something that is happening anyway. We might be saving the life of the canon by expanding its textual basis so that it does not become too detached from other spheres of society like the labor market where the laws of the market and technological progress make it neccessary to include new

groups into the work force which in turn also need access to better schooling.[4] In order not to become completely irrelevant, the elitist endeavor of studying literature is forced to take notice of new groups moving into the labor force, a process visible at many points in the historical development of the canon and curricula.

What we as reformers of the canon hope to achieve reflects the same idealism which the conservative advocates of a core of great works of Western civilization display, the idealism that social reform can be achieved through the appropriate teaching of cultural artifacts.[5] What both sides usually do not see is the change in the structure of higher education which stands in the way of our best intentions. At the college level the teaching of literature becomes more and more marginalized as the colleges are turned into pre-professional schools with little room for the liberal arts. Unfortunately, the literature departments themselves react to this trend, and thereby support it, when, for example, the drop in enrollment in German is counteracted by offering business and scientific German. Voluntarily, the only space where reading can be practiced without being tied to a specific purpose, where reason is not instrumentalized, is given up and the languages and literatures reduced to auxiliaries of science and business. The other type of reading is relegated to the ghetto of freshmen seminars and first year study courses, to the exclusive circle of liberal arts colleges, and to the higher planes of the graduate programs whose technocratic language tries to rival that of the sciences. While the average undergraduates struggle to finish their pre-med, pre-business, pre-law and whatever other pre-major programs within reasonable time, the English departments, too, become best known not for their literature courses but for their remedial writing courses.

The other institutional obstacle standing in the way of our attempts to change things by reforming the canon is the structure of higher education itself. We are faced with the paradox that we are attempting to work for equal representation of underprivileged social groups on our reading lists within an institution which traditionally has had the task of handing out the credentials for access to positions of power in unequal doses, thereby participating in the perpetuation of social injustice. As mentioned above, access to what is being called "cultural capital" is only granted to new and additional social groups when their participation in certain sectors of the labor market is desired.[6] The fight between upholders of the Western tradition and the advocates of multiculturalism remains academic as long as certain relations of ownership of cultural capital are not addressed. The danger lies in losing steam for reform at the level of access to the institutions of higher education in the battle over which books to put on the reading list.

Apart from the contradiction between the traditional mission of higher education and our attempts to introduce cultural diversity into the curriculum we are also faced with a methodological paradox. The initiatives for reforming the canon and the curriculum in the languages and literatures are being voiced in the rarified language of recent developments in literary theory which in itself takes the form of a canon, in this case a set of theoretical writings. Access to this kind of canon is usually only granted through participation in the respective graduate course on literary theory and methods. The ones who are supposed to benefit from the reforms are excluded from the debate because they do not master this rarified discourse. As a result, students are confronted with the results of our deliberations in the form of new special topics courses

and new reading lists without having been able to follow the discussions that led us to abandon the traditional canon, the notion of a unified subject, of the distinction between high and low culture and between major and minor literatures. Substituting new texts will not change the nature of the discourse of literary study which seems to be designed to differentiate between ordinary readers and the ones who have mastered the canon of theoretical writings.[7] The question of access to literature is not decided on the level of the reading lists but on the level of approaches to these reading lists which is why we have to teach the debate about the canon at the same time at which we are changing it. Theory so far has helped us to pose the right questions, but it has also become another instrument of selection between the merely literate and the theoretically literate.

It is therefore necessary to reenact the debate about canon reform in our courses. Otherwise the new set of texts would take on the form of just another institutionalized reform with those for whom it was intended being excluded from the process which led to it. If we do not teach this conflict we rely solely on the transformative powers of the new texts we select. To me it seems it is more important to emphasize what the canon debate says about the exclusionary force of certain approaches to the texts, how a canon of texts can be used as an instrument for withholding or granting access to cultural capital. Furthermore, it does not seem to be very helpful if exactly those different approaches to bodies of texts are practiced in separate courses without confronting each other. If the period course covering the canonized texts and the special topics course on minorities in German culture are taught parallel to each other and if in the former course the professor forces students to apply the methods of New Criticism while the one in the latter incorporates New Historicism, to the

students both the texts and the methods will just look like idiosyncracies of the respective professor. Papers and contributions in the course will correspond to what the students sense the respective professor wants to hear. Gerald Graff has suggested that because you probably could not get these two professors to team teach, departments could decide on a common topic for a given semester which would expose the students to the different approaches to this topic ("Other Voices" 826 and 829).

I now want to outline some of the approaches to the existing canon which might make students aware of why we want to change the canon and which might pave the way for the teaching of alternative courses without losing sight of the debates which suggested these alternatives to begin with. One approach is to address the nature of the institution in which our students are taught and the role the canon plays in this institution. A starting point would be to look at which groups are represented among the students themselves and how this compares to the social location of the authors on the reading list and whether both are representative of the culture in question. This will lead to questions about differences in representation when one differentiates by gender, ethnic origin, and class. This might serve to point out that not the groups which are left out of the canon are marginal, but that the canon itself is a field defined by a marginal group, the critics, that what is called marginal by them is only marginal to their activity, the progressive rarification of a discourse about literature access to which is highly selective.[8] Here the original meaning of the word canon, "measure," comes into play, that it has served as a measure of education and an instrument of limiting or facilitating access to certain positions in society. One would also have to differentiate between the function of the canon as a model for acceptable

styles in writing, when it was used to teach purpose related writing for future vocations, and its role in training an elite in the methods of interpretation, foreshadowing future roles of those selected few in government and administration.[9] This approach might serve to point out that it is not so much bad ideology in the texts of the canon but may be more bad ideology in the way the canon was and is being taught which we are reacting to. Here we can also address the question that the ideological impetus of a project like the canon can change over time, that for example the model of a literary public sphere of educated men served to give a new class, the bourgeoisie, access to positions of power in competition and confrontation with the royal courts and only later turned into an instrument of exclusion.[10]

This leads to the historical aspect of this approach to teaching the canon, the function it had in the past and how this function changed within the institution of higher education. Historical studies of this sort exist,[11] but it could probably be illustrated best by looking at the changes in course offerings over time, a sort of historical survey of the college catalogues and differences between course offerings at different types of schools, by investigating what was considered to be the core of an education reflected in guidelines for public schools, by comparing reading lists from different courses and departments, by tracing the development of new departments such as Women's Studies or Black Studies, and by looking at the changes in the programs of professional conventions like the annual MLA meetings. A combination of these aspects might suggest the ways in which canon reform responded to social pressures, but maintained its status as an instrument of selection. In some cases, as for example German literature, such an approach can also highlight how a common

culture is instrumentalized to serve as a homogenizing force in the absence of a unified national state. The canon will also turn out to be much more open than it appears when one looks at its dialogue with that which it does not want to be. It will become clear that the canon cannot exist without ist "other," whether this is what's called low culture or what is considered to be too marginal to be included in the canon. It should be stressed that this approach will of course be ineffective if it is not also accompanied by a change in the method of instruction where the difference in power and status and pedagocical authority is at the very least made a topic of discussion.[12] This also reminds us that teaching, reading, and intepreting practices are part of the canon, in other words that it does not suffice to exchange the old texts of the canon for new ones.

Another approach to be included into this project of reading the canon against the grain would be to invoke an awareness for the fact that we are not selecting a set of values by selecting a certain body of texts, but that certain socially constructed reading practices bring the values to the texts.[13] We react to texts in different ways because we are trained to look for different things. The texts of the canon belong to the canon because they corresponded to what critics, teachers, and a community of readers chose to look for and value in a text. Complexity of expression, openness to different interpretations, the duplicity of literal meaning and hidden meaning as literary values are a reflection of the values ingrained in the ideology of a certain social formation and by no means universal.[14] Similarly, the celebration of the dissolution of the unified subject in certain texts can be linked to an ideological project that wants to suggest the end of individual agency in society.[15] In short, teaching the canon must involve an analysis of the change in reading practices over time, how we

are trained to look for certain aspects in the texts. This approach can also serve to point out that the supposedly universal values in the works of the canon have served to ignore the historical specificity of each work in the canon. The students would be prepared to answer those critics who maintain that the canon lives on because the texts in it are supposedly of a better quality. We would also diffuse some of the tension that has built up over the question of the canon by emphasizing that it is not so much what we read, but how we read it, that not the texts transmit certain values, but certain practices of interpretation.

Part of this approach would be to look at the role of literary criticism in holding up certain qualities in literature as the standard and proof of "good literature." An example of this is how in the history of German literature certain genres were considered to be of higher value and more appropriate to the medium of writing. In the 18th century, philosophical treatises served to prove the superiority of drama over poetry and epistolary literature in order to marginalize the few genres to which women had access.[16] Similarly, contemporary critics sometimes still comment on the mastery, or lack thereof, of the language of non-native writers, apparently in an attempt to show that they do not really belong to "German culture" and displaying the typical condescending attitude of the canon makers who are ignorant of the fact that language innovation mostly comes from outside of the language.

The last approach to the canon I would like to address is actually an old one, but has unfortunately fallen out of favor. It is the discipline of sociology of literature which investigates who could read and write during a given period, what the different social classes were taught to read, also which classes bought and read which kind of literature, and similar

questions. Fortunately, a lot of research like this was done in the sixties and seventies, so this information can easily be made accessible for courses on pretty much any time period.[17] The purpose of this information in the given context seems obvious. It answers the very basic questions about who had access to reading and writing, it points out the different intentions behind the curricula for the different social classes attending different types of schools, and who read the books which now belong to the canon. In the sixties and seventies this work was done primarily for an analysis of class differences, but it can be expanded to cover questions of gender and race as well. It is also the most direct approach to the thesis about the unequal distribution of cultural capital. Only the question about the distribution of cultural capital can lead to the answer why there is so much silence outside of the canon. It will also show that the canon works as much by exclusion as by a much earlier process of selection in the institutions of learning. It might also explain that expressing oneself through writing was not always part of what we now call socially constructed subjectivity.

I want to end by listing all the things we will miss out on if we do not teach the canon. We spare the canon some necessary criticism and leave its teaching to those who teach it affirmatively. We deprive students of the prestige still associated with knowledge of the canon in certain circles of society. Not everyone can afford ignorance of this portion of cultural capital. We might transfer our ways of reading without reflection from one body of texts to the other which would be an enterprise just as exclusive and selective as teaching the original canon. We would thus perpetuate the prejudices of literary study, the distinction between complex and accessible texts, between high and low culture, and the

hierarchies of genres in which autobiography often ranks very low. We would create the illusion of equal representation on our reading lists without addressing the initial injustice of unequal access to the means of literary expression. We would lose sight of the fact that literature is a very exclusive activity to begin with. We would neglect to search for the resisting voices in the works of the traditional canon, a process which could easily lead to idealizing the counter-canon. In fact, we would leave the critique of our culture to those voices who previously were marginalized, in other words we would leave the most uncomfortable role of critique to outsiders, thus reenforcing their status as outsiders. An example from German literature is the tendency to leave a critique of German society's coldness to the voices of immigrants from the much warmer South of Europe, a mechanism similar to the one linking native American culture to a better understanding of environmental issues.[18] We might also jump to the wrong conclusion that an author from a minority represents the experience of this minority while in regard to the works of the canon we have long abandoned this simple equation.[19] Lumping all non-canonical works together also suggests the danger of equating the experience of all marginalized groups. Furthermore, ignoring the concept of a high culture would mean to ignore the actual power this construct still exerts. We would also be ignoring the institutional reality which surrounds us at the college level. Finally we would cede to the ultra-conservatives the claim that the canon represents a homogeneous monolithic Western culture (cf. Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 47).

Endnotes:

1. The critic who is the strongest advocate for this position is Gerald Graff (Graff, "Other Voices" 821 and "What should we be teaching" 200).

2. On the illusionary aspects of a representative canon see Guillory, "Canonical and Non-Canonical" 485.

3. Guillory describes a similar phenomenon how women are now better represented in the literary canon, but have to bear an increasing share of the poverty in society (*Cultural Capital* 37f.).

4. On this aspect see Guillory, "Canonical and Non-Canonical" 497.

5. On the idealism of conveying a sense of social justice through an appropriate reading list see Graff, "What Should We Be Teaching" 195.

6. Guillory in *Cultural Capital* 8 makes a similar point about the pressure of the labor market on the contents of the curriculum.

7. On the increasing rarification of the discourse in literary studies see Guillory, *Cultural Capital* xi-xii.

8. Lauter points out that the teaching of the canon must show that it is not the alternatives we want to offer which are marginal but the canon itself (142).

9. On these two historically different uses of the canon see Guillory, "Canon" 241-242.

10. The most important study of the role of literary discussions in the formulation of a new role for the bourgeoisie is Jürgen Habermas' seminal book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.*

11. For example Bernal and Bolgar.

12. For a similar approach to this aspect see Ferguson 219.

13. Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 22-23, points out that literary works are intrinsically neither progressive or reactionary.

14. For comments suggesting that different sets of values transmitted in

the teaching of the canon serve to prepare students for differentiated future roles in society see Guillory, "Canonical and Non-Canonical" 494.

15. Lauter demonstrates that the practice of declaring the subject dead has very different implications for different social groups and that the homogenizing impulse behind this assertion is again an attempt to formulate a seemingly universal method of criticism which serves those who propagate it (159).

16. For an example of how literary criticism functions in setting up genres along gender lines see Weidauer. Guillory, "Canon" 238, makes a similar point.

17. Literary histories of Germany started in the 70s tend to have the expression "social history" in their titles (see the two examples in the bibliography) indicating that they contain information on the level of literacy at a given point in history and about the readership for different genres.

18. Gorak discusses how the consideration of another culture often turns into the discussion of a set of values assumed to be functioning in one's own culture (206).

19. Teraoka stresses the importance of asking in regard to every text the question "Who speaks for whom?" (83).

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